

# OPINION



# the Astorian

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## GUEST COLUMN

# Making the 'People's House' safe

The gold man atop the Oregon State Capitol has gone dark. A cavernous hole has arisen at the building basement; another is on its way. The governor, secretary of state and state treasurer have been ousted from their offices. Guided tours of the Capitol are gone until 2025.

Those development are purposeful. Such is the price — a half-billion dollars plus a few years of temporary inconvenience — for finally making the “People’s House” safe for the people.



**DICK HUGHES**

The Capitol was in such sad shape seismically that in 2015, state Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, told my colleagues and me: “Given what we know, we should close the Capitol down today. At least we should protect kids from coming in,” referring to school field trips.

There’s more. The plumbing is so bad that the drinking fountains are unusable. The HVAC system could run hot in summer, cold in winter, with creaky ventilation. Parts of the building lacked fire sprinklers and other safety devices, including safe exits and sufficient staircases. The building was inhospitable to anyone using a wheelchair, scooter or stroller.

The first phases of the renovation and reconstruction corrected some deficiencies, especially in the 1977 legislative wings. The final, most expensive phase centers on the largest, oldest portion — the Capitol completed in 1938. So that work can be done, that area has been closed to the public, officeholders and legislative employees since July 1.

Staff have relocated. If you’re looking for the governor’s office, go to the nearby State Library across the Capitol Mall.

History buffs will recall that the previous capitol burned to the ground on April 25, 1935. A young Mark Hatfield was among the Salem residents who



The Oregon Pioneer on top of the Oregon State Capitol.

Statesman Journal

came out to witness the inferno. Though long ago, that experience illustrates the relevance of the safety improvements underway.

The construction almost didn’t happen and was delayed for years by bipartisan opposition. Courtney was the cheerleader for what in 2015 was a \$337 million project. At crunch time, House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, and House Majority Leader Val Hoyle, D-Eugene, said the seismic improvements were needed but the time wasn’t right. Joining them in voting “no,” on a committee vote that effectively stopped the project from moving ahead, were Rep. Tobias Read, D-Beaverton; Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner; and Sen. Fred Girod, R-Lyons. Siding with Courtney

were Rep. John Huffman, R-The Dalles, and Sen. Richard Devlin, D-Tualatin.

The price tag, uncertain public support and inconvenience bothered some lawmakers. During construction, the Legislature and other officials would have had to vacate the Capitol and use the renovated Public Utility Commission building — a former Sears store near the Capitol Mall — as their temporary capitol.

As a result, initial project staff were let go; \$25 million already had been spent.

Courtney was not happy: “When the magnitude 9 quake hits, the loss of life and property across our state will be tremendous. The decision not to complete this project ensures that those losses

will include the Oregon State Capitol and the people inside it.”

He persevered instead of knocking heads to get his way that year. The Legislature embraced a much smaller, \$59.9 million project the next year as the first phase of the Capitol Accessibility, Maintenance and Safety project. The 2020 Legislature added phase 2 at \$70.8 million. With new leadership in the Oregon House this year and Courtney finishing his final term as Senate president, the 2022 Legislature approved the big phase 3: \$375 million.

Lawmakers are used to conducting meetings and public hearings virtually, so restricted access to committee rooms no longer was an impediment. The construction schedule was reconfigured so the House and Senate could use their chambers during the legislative sessions. Work should wrap up in late 2025.

The big hole on the north side of the Capitol and one that will emerge farther west are so workers can get under the building, gut the lower level, hook up additional water and sewer lines, put in temporary shoring, remove the existing cement columns, and place new columns and devices to keep the structure stable during the quake.

As for the Oregon Pioneer atop the Capitol — colloquially known as the gold man — Capitol Accessibility, Maintenance and Safety director Jodie Jones told me that crews will seek a work-around to again illuminate the statue at night.

Unless something intervenes, next week I’ll delve into the various changes underway at the Capitol and how they will affect the public and politicians. If you have questions you’d like answered, send them my way.

By the way, some Oregonians love the Capitol’s design. Some despise it, complaining the top looks like a cake ornament or a bowling trophy. What say you?

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### We all know

In the Aug. 9 edition of The Astorian, there was a front-page story on long-term rental units being converted to vacation rentals. I’m certain this was good news for all those relying on tourism dollars, while being bad news for local residents.

I understand from the story that the buildings in question are in a commercial zone, which makes all this an outright use. The owners cite that this is the only means to recover the expensive restoration of historic property.

We all know the issue with housing here in Astoria. We lack low-income, workforce and market-value units. Employers cannot fill positions due to the lack of inventory for the prospective employees. Residents cannot downsize or grow into a new home. And although surveys state the vacation rentals are not the issue for a lack of long-term housing, I disagree.

The city is in a tug of war with the owners of the new vacation rentals mentioned in the article over a loss of six long-term rentals. But what is the city doing about the number of homeowners in residential areas using their properties as illegal vacation rentals? They are easily found through Vacasa, Vrbo, Airbnb, etc.

I feel badly for those who have been displaced by property owners chasing tourism dollars. If the city was consistent in applying the zoning laws for vacation rentals, new homes might have been found more easily.

MARCIA FENSKE  
Astoria

### Most experienced

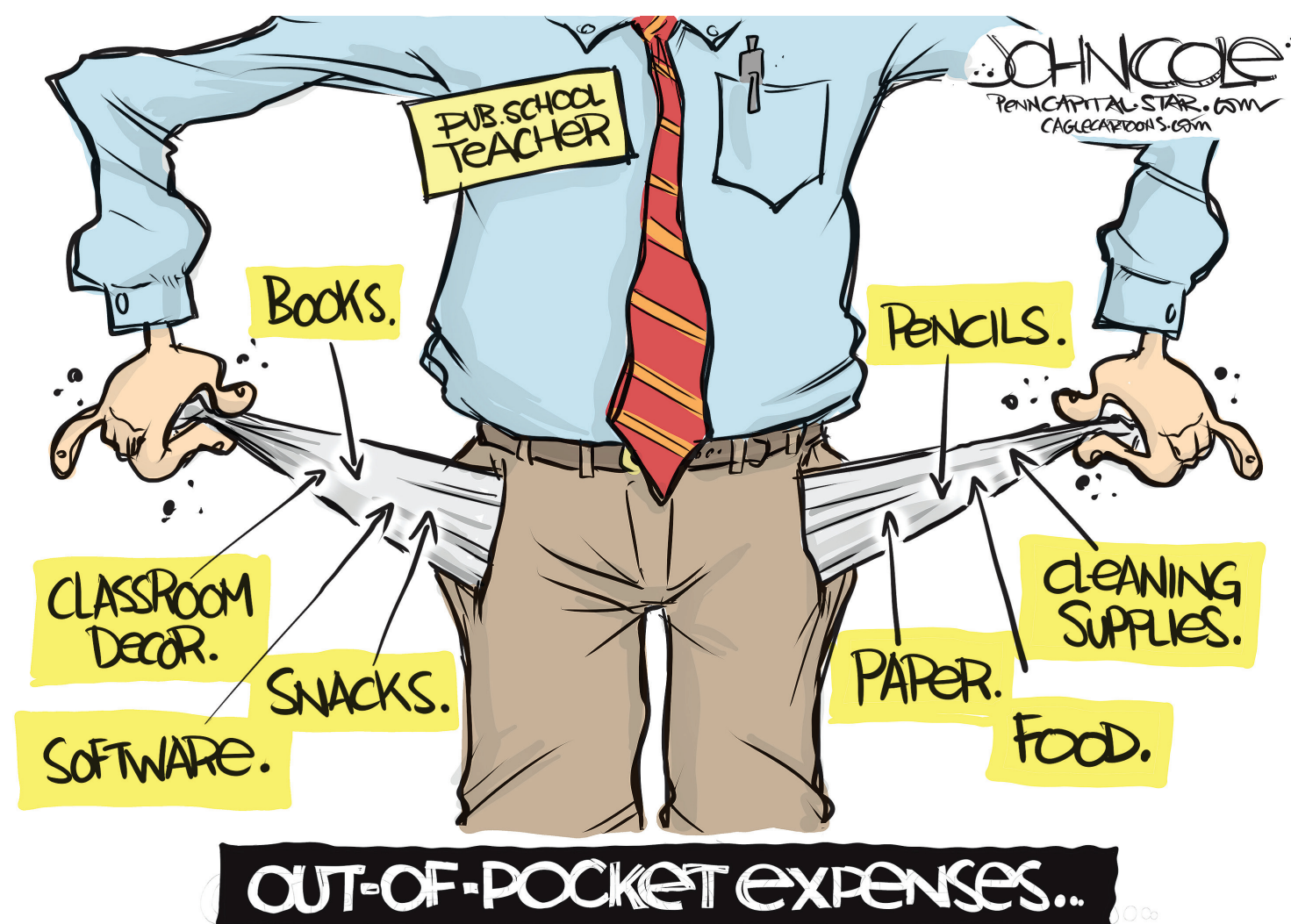
I am writing in support of Rick Gray, nonaffiliated candidate for House District 32. I met Rick after he filed to run for what is my former legislative seat. We met for coffee, and he told me about his history and experience in politics. He asked for my input and advice on the district.

I found him to be thoughtful and intelligent. He has a lot of varied experience, including having served in Virginia as what we call secretary of state here in Oregon. He drafted legislation with his father, a state representative and senator for 18 years, and he understands the legislative process. He has done his research, and has met many of those who either serve or direct in local district businesses, agencies and services.

DEBORAH A. BOONE  
Cannon Beach

He’s a big thinker with big ideas. He looks at the issues from a long-term viewpoint, somewhat of a rarity these days. The fact that he is nonpartisan allows him the freedom to be independent and pursue his agenda as such.

I believe that of all three candidates, Rick is the most experienced, and that is important to me. I hope you will join me in supporting Gray.



## LETTERS WELCOME

Letters should be exclusive to The Astorian. Letters should be fewer than 250 words and must include the writer’s name, address and phone number. You will be contacted to confirm authorship. All letters are subject to editing for space, grammar and factual accuracy. Only two letters per writer are allowed each month. Letters written in response

to other letter writers should address the issue at hand and should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil. Send via email to editor@dailyastorian.com, online at bit.ly/astorianletters, in person at 949 Exchange St. in Astoria or mail to Letters to the Editor, P.O. Box 210, Astoria, OR., 97103.

### No good deed

It’s sad to read about the Tourist No. 2 ferry sinking. It seems the owner, along with a group of locals, had nothing but good intentions to preserve a piece of Astoria’s history. Funding couldn’t meet the need for the U.S. Coast Guard’s standards, so everyone walked away, and now there’s a million-dollar cleanup bill heading in someone’s direction. Finger-pointing aside, it’s too bad this

211-year-old city hasn’t figured out how to preserve its rich river history. This city’s roots are grounded in that river. The horse-drawn net fishing, the butterfly boats, the bowpickers, the canneries, the bar pilots, the legends of Shanghai, the Graveyard of the Pacific shipwrecks — it’s truly the birthplace of Astoria.

After 211 years what do we have to show for it? A re-created (albeit magnificent) Cannery Pier Hotel, a burned down No. 10 Sixth Street building, a Buoy Beer restaurant that collapsed, a net shed that is one storm away from falling in the river, an abandoned harbor of sea lions, a Pier 39 that is hanging on by a thread, as well as an abandoned railroad way.

Our waterfront is struggling, and it shouldn’t be; it should be our No. 1 focus. I’m sorry the Tourist No. 2 sank, and I hope there’s a way to remove it from the river without destroying it. I hope Astoria can circle the wagons around our fading history of the Columbia waterfront, and preserve what little pieces we have left.

CHRIS DeLONG  
Astoria